



**Languages and literatures of the Muslims of the Horn of Africa
some first general reflections**

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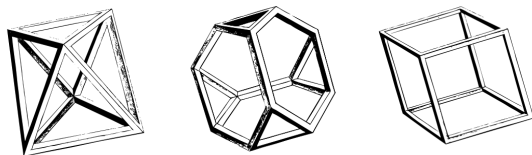


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ALESSANDRO GORI

LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES OF THE MUSLIMS
OF THE HORN OF AFRICA:
SOME FIRST GENERAL REFLECTIONS

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK¹

Generally speaking the overall linguistic situation in the Islamic world outside the Arabic speaking countries shows some very well-known basic dichotomies which can be briefly summarized as follows:

- 1) There is a clear opposition between Classical Arabic (language of culture, learning and intellectual discussion among the acculturated elite) and the local language(s) which is/are used in both spoken and written form for every-day communication. The local language is normally also the tool of oral instruction in educational institutions of a lower level (e.g. in Koranic schools for children) but is normally superimposed by Arabic in higher education.
- 2) Both Arabic and local languages can give birth to a written tradition preserved and diffused mostly in manuscripts which are copied locally and/or imported from other Islamic countries.
- 3) Many of the texts (both in Arabic and in local languages) which make up the local written literary tradition have also a parallel oral tradition which intermingles with the written one.
- 4) The aforementioned linguistic and literary dichotomies have been interpreted by many scholars as manifestations of a broader distinction between a higher (learned) culture expressing itself in a written form in Arabic (the universal language of Islam) and a lower culture which is almost exclusively oral and in local languages².

To conceptualize the intricate linguistic situation of the Islamic world and the reciprocal influences and relationships of languages and language va-

¹ The following tentative reflections have been elaborated in the framework of the research project *Islam in the Horn of Africa: a Comparative Literary Approach* supported by the European Research Council (advanced grant n. 322849, 2013-2018).

² The existence of an always evident distinction between popular and learned Islam is of course debatable but the discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of the present paper (see at least B. SHOSHAN, *High Culture and Popular Culture in Medieval Islam*, «Studia Islamica», LXXIII, 1991, pp. 67-107 and P.D. GAFFNEY, *Popular Islam*, «Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science», 524, 1992, pp. 38-51).

rieties of the Muslim peoples outside the Arab world, the Italian Islamicist Alessandro Bausani developed the notion of Islamic Languages/Languages of Islam (*lingue islamiche*)³.

Bausani considers an “Islamic language” to be basically a written language of a Muslim people which is strongly influenced by models exemplified on or imported from Classical Arabic (and to a lesser extent in some regions of the Islamic world by Persian and Ottoman Turkish) both in literary style and in lexicon (e.g. loanwords and calques). An “Islamic language” is thus the product of a kind of bookish and learned influence which acts like a prestigious superstratum on written traditions which become similar to each other thanks (or due) to the fact that they are exposed to a common external influence. As for oral literature and folklore the influence of this learned superstratum is apparently less powerful.

Independently from Bausani’s research which was mostly focused on Eastern and South-eastern Asia, some scholars in African Studies have tried to describe the linguistic situation of the Muslim peoples of Western Africa in terms which are not always coincident with those used by the Italian Islamicist.

In a seminal article⁴, Louis Brenner and Murray Last analysed the distribution and role of the languages of the Muslims of Nigeria. The two authors retraced the development of local languages (at first Fulfulde then later Hausa) into what they termed “learned dialects” used for religious explanation in higher educational institutions where Arabic Islamic works are studied and expounded.

Texts in these “learned dialects” have normally only an oral circulation and only rarely are written down. However, contrary to what Bausani postulated, they are always under a strong influence of Arabic both in vocabulary and style⁵.

³ A. BAUSANI, *Per una lettura comparata delle lingue islamiche*, in Atti del Terzo Congresso di Studi Arabi e Islamici (Ravello, 1-6 settembre 1966), Napoli, Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1967, pp. 145-56; ID., *Incontri linguistici in Asia: esperienze di un orientalista*, in *Lingue a contatto nel mondo antico*. Atti del Convegno della Società Italiana di Glottologia (Napoli, 12 e 13 maggio 1978), Pisa, Giardini, 1978, pp. 11-33 (*Orientamenti Linguistici*, 7); ID., *Le lingue islamiche: interazioni e acculturazioni*, in A. BAUSANI – B. SCARCIA AMORETTI, (edd.), *Il mondo islamico tra interazione e acculturazione*, Roma, Istituto di Studi Islamici, 1981, pp. 3-19. The situation here summarily sketched is not only typical to the Islamic civilization as some very similar binary oppositions can be found in other cultural environments. In Jewish culture, for example, one can easily single out the following distinctions: Hebrew and Aramaic vs. Yiddish (or Ladino or Judeo-Arabic); written tradition in the “Classical” languages vs. written traditions in the vernacular; higher vs. lower culture; learned vs. popular tradition. “Jewish languages” is the concept which has been elaborated by the scholars to account for this situation.

⁴ L. BRENNER – M. LAST, *The Role of Language in West African Islam*, «Africa: Journal of the International African Institute», 55, 1985, pp. 432-446.

⁵ E.g. in the fulfulde *Kabbe*, a kind of handbook of Islamic theology and law based on as-Sanūsī’s *al-‘Aqīdah aṣ-ṣuḡrā* which circulates widely among Fulani Muslims in West Africa mostly in oral form (but some parts of it have been found also in manuscripts).

More recently, Francesco Zappa⁶ detected in Mali the development of an “oral learned literature” in Bambara on which Classical Arabic has exerted a strong influence. Interestingly, this kind of literature is not only Islamic but also secular or linked to the traditional Bambara religion and mythology and shows a clear tendency to pass to a written form⁷.

If one moves the focus to East Africa, in a wide scope contribution Rex S. O’ Fahey⁸ clearly depicts a complementary relationship between what he calls a “scribal fluency” in Classical Arabic and a stable orality in a local language, thus reaffirming the abovementioned dichotomy “Arabic-written-learned vs. local language-oral-popular”.

East Africa is also one of few regions of the Islamic world where phenomena of islamization and de-islamization of language are easily detectable. Kiswahili was born under a direct impact of Arabic⁹ but was then secularized (or even Christianised) because of the direct intervention of Protestant missionaries and colonial administrators (e.g. Johann Ludwig Krapf) who promoted a revision of the vocabulary and the shift from Arabic to Latin script to write the language¹⁰.

2. ISLAMIC LANGUAGES IN THE HORN OF AFRICA: THE QUEST FOR THE NON-EXISTENT?

The Horn of Africa has perhaps one of the most complex linguistic situations in the Islamic world also because of the compresence of a very variegated religious panorama where in some regions Muslims have to coexist side to side with Christianity as a minority group.

Some scholars have already tried to analyse the interaction of local languages and Classical Arabic¹¹ and at least two divergent assessments have been so far carried out. According to the first interpretation, Harari (the Semitic language spoken in the walled city of Harar and its surroundings) and not Arabic has been the major language of Islam in the Eastern part of

⁶ F. ZAPPA, *Écrire l’Islam en bambara*, «Archives de sciences sociales des religions», 147, 2009, pp. 167-186. ID., *L’islamizzazione della lingua bambara in Mali. Tra pubblicistica scritta e letteratura orale*, Supplemento n. 2 della Rivista degli Studi Orientali, vol. LXXVII, Pisa/Roma, Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, 2004.

⁷ It is however too soon to speak of the birth of a manuscript tradition.

⁸ R.S. O’FAHEY, *Islam language and ethnicity in Eastern Africa. Some literary considerations*, Harriet Tubman Seminar, Dept. Of History, York University, Toronto, Apr. 3, 2000, available on line: www.yorku.ca/nhp/seminars/seminars/ofahey.rtf.

⁹ A. MAZRUI, *Swahili Beyond the Boundaries: Literature, Language, and Identity*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2007.

¹⁰ A. MAZRUI - P. ZIRIMUTHE, *Secularization of an Afro-Islamic language: church, state, and market-place in the spread of Kiswahili*, «Journal of Islamic Studies», 1, 1990, pp. 24-53.

¹¹ BOGUMIL W. ANDRZEJEWSKI, *Islamic Literature of Somalia*, African Studies Program, Bloomington, Indiana University, 1983.

Ethiopia and the Somali area for the past three centuries while the various groups of Muslims in the Gurage area South of Addis Ababa have been communicating in Amharic and not Arabic¹². Other scholars replied that Arabic has been used as lingua franca of the Ethiopian Muslims since the Middle-Ages until now¹³.

If one looks at the position of Arabic in the area, the situation can be summarized as follows.

Modern Standard Arabic is one of the official languages of Eritrea and has been the official language of Somalia until 1972. This position triggered the birth of a kind of modern Arabic literature including periodical press, critical and political essays and a limited amount of fiction. Moreover a good command of spoken Modern Standard Arabic is quite widespread in both these two countries (especially in Eritrea).

As for Classical Arabic, this variety of Arabic has been extensively used in the Horn for teaching and learning particularly in higher educational institutions. Ethiopian, Eritrean and Somali Muslim learned men read, copied and wrote texts in Classical Arabic developing a huge literary production in historiography, hagiography, Arabic grammar, Islamic law and theology and *tafsīr*. The greatest part of this literature has been preserved and diffused in manuscripts since the end of the 17th century, the oldest so far found Islamic manuscript in the Horn of Africa being dated to 22 *ḡumādā al-āḥirah* 989 A.H./14 July 1581 A.D.¹⁴. Printed books in classical Arabic started spreading in the Horn around 1920 and managed to overwhelm the manuscript tradition only towards the end of the past century¹⁵. Besides the Qurʾān, as everywhere else in the Islamic world, most of the circulating texts are standard handbooks for instruction. Oral explanation of the texts in local languages is com-

¹² A.J. DREWES, *Classical Arabic in Central Ethiopia*, Leiden, Brill, 1976 (Oosters Genootschap in Nederland, 7).

¹³ CHARLES A. FERGUSON, *The Role of Arabic in Ethiopia: A Sociolinguistic Perspective*, in A.S. DIL (ed.), *Language Structure and Language Use*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1971, pp. 293-31 (Languages and Linguistics Monograph Series 23). For a general assessment of the presence of Arabic in Ethiopia see also: A. GORI, *Arabic in Ethiopia*, in S. UHLIG (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, I, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2003, pp. 301-304; ID., *Arabic in Eritrea*, in S. UHLIG (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, I, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2003, pp. 304-307; A. WETTER, *Arabic in Ethiopia*, in KEES VERSTEEGH (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*, 2, Leiden, Brill, 2007, pp. 51-56.

¹⁴ Manuscript of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies n. 1852. The codex is of Egyptian origin and was acquired by the emir of Harar Ahmad b. Muḥammad b. Yūsuf in 1212/1797-8: see A. GORI et alii, *A Handlist of the Manuscripts in the Institute of the Ethiopian Studies*, II: *The Arabic Materials of the Ethiopian Islamic Tradition*, Eugene (Oregon), Pickwick Publications, 2014, p. 24. (Ethiopic Manuscripts, Texts, and Studies 20).

¹⁵ See on the diffusion of the Islamic printing press in Ethiopia: A. GORI, *Between Manuscripts and Books: Islamic Printing in Ethiopia*, in C. DAVIS and D. JOHNSON (edd.), *The Book in Africa. Critical Debates*, Houndmills, Basingstoke – New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 65-82 (New Directions in Book History, 3).

mon but no written commentaries or translations in local languages have been found so far.

Classical Arabic is only very sporadically used orally (e.g. in religious sermons and exhortations) and it is always accompanied by a translation in one of the local spoken languages. Some kind of spoken Arabic, however, is easily heard in the Horn of Africa. It can be Yemeni dialect in the East or the Sudan dialect in the West. The Gulf dialect has become increasingly spread because of the huge waves of immigration from the Horn to the rich states of the Arabian Peninsula. In the learned milieu, sometimes a hybrid variety can be heard where characteristics of different dialects are mixed up randomly in speech according to the personal experiences (e.g. a stay in al-Azhar, in Saudi Arabia, Syria, Libya) and linguistic skills of the speaker.

A special position in the linguistic and cultural panorama of the Islam in the Horn of Africa has been always attributed to the walled city of Harar.¹⁶

An independent emirate since 1647 to 1885 and then since 1885 to 1887, Harar saw the birth and the diffusion of a conspicuous literary production in both Classical Arabic and Harari. Manuscripts containing texts in these two languages have been copied and produced in town. Old Harari manuscript literature is attested since the 18th century.¹⁷ The manuscripts in Harari, written in Arabic script,¹⁸ show a clear tendency to an orthographic standardization which can be considered as a clear hint to the development of an indigenous manuscript tradition. The texts contained in the codices have sometimes a parallel written and oral circulation (e.g. some of the texts are meant for recitation during the Mawlid) but the codices have remained for long the main preservers of the local culture. Two are the main genres of this local literature: pietistic-devotional hymns and invocations and guides to the basic instruction in theology and law.

For linguistic and general cultural reasons, the language of the texts is nowadays difficult to understand for Hararis. Moreover, the birth and growth of a printed literature in Harari written in Ethiopian script widens the gap between the traditional Harari texts and the contemporary literary production. As for Arabic, the cultivated Harari elite has still a good

¹⁶ For an introduction to the story and culture of Harar see E. WAGNER, *Harär city structure and main buildings*, in S. UHLIG (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, II, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2005, pp. 1013-1015; ID., *Harär history till 1875*, in S. UHLIG (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, II, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2005, pp. 1015-1019.

¹⁷ For an introduction to the history of the literary production in Harar see G. BANTI, *The Literature of Harar until the end of the 19th century*, in A. GORI - B. SCARCIA AMORETTI (edd.), *Islam in Etiopia: bilanci e prospettive*, Napoli, 18-19 giugno, 2008, Roma, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2010 pp. 149-181 (Civiltà del Mediterraneo, Semestrale di ricerca e informazione, Nuova Serie - Anno VIII-IX (XIII-XIV), n. 16-17, Dicembre 2009 - Giugno 2010).

¹⁸ In academic literature the writing of non-Arabic languages (especially African languages) in Arabic script is generally called '*ʿagami*'.

knowledge of the Classical language and has easy access to a whole set of Arabic Islamic texts.

It is difficult to decide whether a labels as “learned [Islamic] dialect” or “oral learned literature” can be given to Harari. As matter of fact, Harari has mainly been the language of the Harari people and has been very little known by other Muslims (also in the Harar region). On the contrary, the Harari language is one of the fundamental elements of the identity and after Harar was included in the Ethiopian (Christian) kingdom and lost its independence, it has had no possibility to spread outside the restricted circle of the Harari people, heavily suffering the concurrence of Amharic, the official language of the Ethiopian state.

If one passes to analyse the situation of the other main languages of the Muslims in the area Amharic, Oromo and Somali, the picture changes substantially from what can be seen in Harar. There is an apparently limited written tradition in ‘*aḡamī*. Few and very recent manuscripts (since the end of 19th century) have been so far located containing Amharic, Oromo or Somali texts written in Arabic script. Contentwise, they are mostly devotional hymns and invocations and simple collections of the basic tenets of the faith written by learned men but meant for the average believer. The texts have both a written and an oral circulation and are often conceived to be recited. Orthographic rules are random and no structured manuscript tradition can be detected. Some manuscripts are thus just an aide-mémoire for recitation. The main cultural aim that these texts have is “indigenizing” Islam¹⁹.

Despite this fade historical background, Amharic, Oromo and at least partially also Somali have apparently started a development towards becoming “learned [Islamic] languages” with a preponderantly oral usage and diffusion. In Ethiopia, after the fall of the so-called *Därg* regime in 1991, there has been an unprecedented blossoming of the Islamic literature in Amharic and Oromo (written in Latin alphabet)²⁰. Books and booklets

¹⁹ See A. PANKHURST, *Indigenising Islam in Wällo: ajām, Amharic verse written in Arabic script*, in BAHRU ZEWDE, R. PANKHURST, TADDESE BEYENE (edd.), *Proceedings of the Xlth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, vol. 2, Addis Ababa, Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1991, pp. 257-276.

²⁰ This literature has been described by HUSSEIN AHMED, *Al-‘Alam: The History of an Ethiopian Arabic Weekly*, in BAHRU ZEWDE, PANKHURST, TADDESE BEYENE, *Proceedings of the Xlth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, vol. 2, pp. 155-165; ID., *Islamic Literature and Religious Revival in Ethiopia (1991-1994)*, «Islam et Sociétés au Sud du Sahara», 12, 1998, pp. 89-108; ID., *Recent Islamic Periodicals in Ethiopia (1996-1998)*, «Northeast African Studies» 5, 1998, pp. 7-21; ID., *Islamic Literature in Ethiopia: a Short Overview*, «Ethiopian Journal of Languages and Literature», 8, 1998, pp. 25-37; ID. together with R.S. O’FAHEY - E. WAGNER, *The Islamic and Related Writings of Ethiopia*, in R.S. O’FAHEY (ed.), *Arabic Literature of Africa*, Volume 3: Fascicle A. *The Writing of the Muslim Peoples of Northeastern Africa*, Leiden, Boston, Brill, pp. 18-68; see also A. GORI, *Brevi note e osservazioni su alcune recenti pubblicazioni islamiche etiopiche in lingua oromo*, «Quaderni del Dipartimento di Linguistica – Università degli Studi di Firenze», 18, 2008, pp. 199-220.

(some translated from Arabic originals) have been printed in Addis Ababa and in other Ethiopian cities for the usage of the faithful. An already impressively immense and continuously growing production of audio-visual material in Amharic and Oromo (and also Tigrinya) is now easily available in bookshops and on the internet.

A side but very remarkable effect of the widening usage of Amharic and Oromo in an Islamic context is that these two languages which are spoken by Christians and Muslims are becoming more and more differentiated along religious lines so that a part of the vocabulary acquires an Islamic connotation²¹.

Also for Somalia, after the collapse of Siyaad Barre's and despite the tragic situation in which the country and the people has been living for more than 20 years a huge production of Islamic audios and videos in Somali successfully challenging Arabic in the learned usage

3. TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS: AN ISLAMIC LANGUAGE 2.0 FOR THE HORN OF AFRICA?

The Islamic literary traditions in local languages written in Arabic script (*'aḡamī*) in the Horn of Africa remained only complementary to the much ponderous Arabic tradition and were formally and linguistically strongly influenced by Arabic models and sources. *'Aḡamī* literature was basically aiming at transferring some basic religious instruction to the average believers in the vernacular language and has been circulating much more orally (especially through communal recitation) than in written form. For different reasons *'aḡamī* traditions did not manage to become deeply rooted in the cultural landscape of the Horn of Africa. Besides, nowadays they are only rarely read and are difficult to be understood by common people.

An only partial exception can be found Harar where the local *'aḡamī* developed in a quite remarkable literary production which however did not trespass the borders of the Harari community.

To detect the formation of some Islamic communication languages other than Arabic in the Horn one must come to analyse the linguistic and cultural situation at the end of the past century. The amazingly huge production and vehement spread of Muslim printed books, booklets and pamphlets for the average believers and the learned men in Amharic, Oromo, Somali, and Tigrinya which started at the mid of the nineties and continues until today triggered a wider usage of these local languages in an more and

²¹ This phenomenon was already detected in the language and style of the first Amharic translation of the Qur'ān: see TH.L. KANE, *Arabic Translations into Amharic*, «Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies», 37, 1974, pp. 608-627.

more Islamically characterized way. The birth of a partially Islamic variant of a common Islamic/Christian language (like Amharic, Oromo and Tigrinya) is quite possible and to a certain extent already a fact.

During the last five years, moreover, the wide diffusion on social networking sites, blogs, forums, file sharing sites of pdfs of texts and video and audio materials has incredibly maximized the possibility of circulation of Islamic texts in local languages.

It is thus the usage of the most advanced 2.0 web potentialities that has fostered the birth of “learned [Islamic] dialects” and of an “oral learned literature” in the Horn of Africa and will probably strengthen and spread it in the near future.